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CENTRAL INTELLIGENCE AGENCY
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CURRENT INTELLIGENCE MEMORANDUM

SUBJECT: Preliminary Comment on the USSR's note of April
on Laos

1. The Soviet reply to the British proposals on Laos is skillfully drafted in such a way as to give the appearance of accommodation to Western views but it does not deal in any way with the crucial issue of the timing of a cease fire. This unwillingness to make a commitment on the timing of a cease fire probably reflects the Soviet leaders' estimate that the Western powers will come to the negotiating table without their sacrificing any of the Communist assets and advantages which flow from the initiative and successes scored by the Kong Le - Pathet Lao forces on the ground.

2. In line with the USSR's official pronouncements and propaganda over the past two months, the note places primary emphasis on Britain's agreement to a 14-nation conference. Moscow, of course, claims credit for having pressed this approach since December and seeks to reap further advantage by

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proposing that the conference be convened immediately ("at the beginning of April") in Phnom Penh.

3. Although the Soviet note professes to agree with the desire expressed in the British note of 23 March for the "quickest cessation of military activities" in Laos, it is deliberately evasive in dealing with the mechanisms for arranging a cease fire proposed by the UK. Aside from Moscow's acceptance of the British proposal for a joint appeal by the Geneva co-chairmen for a cease fire--a move intended to appear as an important concession--the Soviet note does not change the USSR's position in any essential respect from that stated in its aide-memoire of 18 February to the UK proposing the immediate convening of the ICC in New Delhi and an international conference. The note dodges the basic US-UK position which makes reactivation of the ICC and a conference conditional on the achievement of a de facto cease fire. It implicitly rejects the Western concept that a conference cannot be held until the effectiveness of a cease fire is verified by both the Geneva co-chairmen and the ICC.

4. Moscow's reply fails to spell out the authority and functions of the proposed ICC meeting in New Delhi. It states only that the commission should call a meeting as soon as

possible and present its report to the co-chairmen. It is silent on the US-UK view that the ICC should have the function of verifying the effectiveness of a cease fire as a prerequisite to the convening of an international conference. Moscow stipulates only that the renewal of ICC activity should in no way "hold up the calling of an international conference."

5. Moscow's attitude would be consistent with its long-standing position that the changes in the Laotian situation since the 1954 Geneva conference make necessary the formulation of "fresh instructions" for the Commission and that only an international conference would have the authority to work out such directives and confer "new powers" on the ICC. Moscow's concept of the role the ICC should perform prior to a conference was set forth in its 18 February aide-memoire: The ICC meeting in New Delhi would (1) discuss how to resume its activities; (2) consider what further powers it would require to take effective action; and (3) report to the co-chairmen.

6. The Soviet note reaffirms the USSR's recognition of Souvanna Phouma as the only "legal government," but it agrees with the British proposal for negotiations "among the different political tendencies in Laos on measures for strengthening national unity of the country." Moscow also agrees that if the

opposing factions fail to reach agreement before a conference convenes, the conference itself should have the task of "rendering help to the Laotians in reaching agreement." The stated objective of such consultations is the formation of a "neutral government of national unity"--a further indication that the USSR can be expected to insist on substantial Pathet Lao representation in a broadened government.

7. In conclusion, the proposal in Moscow's reply which would relegate the cease fire issue to negotiations between the "interested parties of Laos" provides further evidence that the Soviet government is seeking to evade any commitments on a formal cessation of hostilities prior to an international conference. It also strengthens our impression that the USSR is unwilling to agree to any approach which would indicate Soviet responsibility for or control of the Kong Le-Pathet Lao forces. Since the response on the timing and mechanism for arranging a cease fire is vague, it leaves the way open for further military pressure by these forces.

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